

MINORITIES IN A DEMOCRACY

(Rt. Hon'ble V. S. Srinivasa Sastri Memorial Lecture, 1962-63)

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I am deeply grateful to the Vice-Chancellor and the University for the honour they have done me in inviting me to deliver the Srinivasa Sastri Lecture for 1963. The Vice-Chancellor has always been exceptionally kind to me and I regard this invitation as another evidence of his uniform kindness.

I value this honour the more as this lecture is associated with the memory of one of the greatest fighters for Indian freedom and democracy. Srinivasa Sastri was a great champion of Indian rights and liberties and gave expression to Indian demands in silver-toned oratory which won the admiration of friend and foe alike. He was never extreme in thought or speech and sought to advance the cause of Indian freedom through methods of persuasion and argument. He did not believe in unconstitutional action and still less in violence, and always strove to win over opponents by appealing to their reason and humanity. We are sometimes inclined to think that a fighter must be violent in his approach but in India we have the example of some of the gentlest men who have been the greatest fighters for freedom. Srinivasa Sastri was gentle and moderate in the expression of his views but his moderation and gentleness grew out of intense conviction about the rightness of his cause. This combination of reasonableness and faith is particularly characteristic of the democratic way of life. In fact, one of the essential conditions for the success of democracy is to combine intensity of conviction with moderation in expression and action. Unless that combination is there democracy cannot flourish; perhaps it cannot even survive. It is therefore a matter for pleasure and congratulation that the University has sought to honour the memory of a man who always stood for the ideals of balance and sobriety of judgment, and adopted an intellectual approach to problems rather than an emotional and excited approach.

The subject of my lecture today is 'Minorities in a Democracy'. And perhaps I may start by saying that there can be no question of minorities except in a democracy. Unless there is democracy the problem would not arise in that form at all. In

ancient times also, there were no doubt groups of people who were united by certain common features and felt themselves as one common unit. That, I take it, is the essence of a minority ; that a group, on some basis or other, has a sense of *akinness*, a sense of community or unity, and further that this sense of community or unity distinguishes it from the majority of the inhabitants of the area where this minority functions. Unless these two elements are there, there would be no consciousness of a minority as such. We have examples of such minorities even in pre-historic and early historic times. If we think of the fate and condition of the Jews before Moses brought them out of Egypt, they were by all definitions a minority as we understand the term.

Nevertheless I would go back to what I said a moment ago, that the problem of minorities as such is essentially a problem of the modern age, essentially a problem of democracy. In those ancient and prehistoric times, and even in early historic times—one may indeed say, till almost the beginning of the modern age—power was exercised by individuals or groups on considerations other than the consent of the majority. There was no doubt acquiescence by the majority, but it was a king's will which prevailed, or where there were different types of feudal government, it was the will of the ruling group which mattered, and that ruling group was almost invariably a minority. It, in fact, retained its minority character, and wanted to remain a minority.

Many of us will remember that these earlier ruling classes took steps to see that knowledge and authority,—and one may indeed say, authority on the basis of the knowledge which they possessed,—did not become a common possession of the entire community. Knowledge was power in ancient Egypt, in Greece, in Rome and Persia, in India and China. In all countries at all times, knowledge has been power ; but knowledge was strictly guarded as the possession of a small minority. The problem of minorities as we know it today did not therefore arise in those days. Minorities exercised power and very often the majority had to submit.

It is only when personal rule or group rule of a class was replaced by what one may call the consensus of opinion, by the will of the majority, it is only when a community became

conscious that all members of a community have certain functions, certain duties, and certain rights, that this question of minorities attained increased importance. Even then for a long time the minority problem was not consciously felt. It did not come on the surface. We find distinct groups in the medieval times, and in early modern times ; but these groups, while they had certain social and other privileges or lack of them, while they had certain customs and conventions which were peculiar to them, did not generally attempt to exercise political power on the basis of their special characteristics.

I think one has to link up the emergence of minority consciousness with another development which becomes marked only after the middle ages. Before the middle ages, the individual was very often content to serve merely as a unit in a community, he was a member of a community and little else. You will remember the old saying that in primitive societies, custom was king. It simply means that people in such societies generally reacted in the same way to similar situations. Individual consciousness as such was in those days a rare phenomenon. The individual trying to think and act for himself was not very common. The growth of personality and individualism on the one hand and, on the other, the gradual diffusion of the democratic idea by which political power was exercised by masses of people on considerations other than mere birth or status, these were the conditions which created the background for the emergence of the minority problem.

To go back for a moment to what I said earlier, the minority consists of individuals who have a sense of akinness, who have a sense of community, who feel that this sense of akinness distinguishes them from the majority of the people who live in that area. There will be no question of a minority problem between groups which have no contact with one another. It is only when there is constant contact of groups which are or feel themselves to be divergent that the problem becomes acute.

This sense of kinship of a group may be based on different factors. There are certain types of kinship which are difficult to change. I was going to say impossible to change, but I changed my mind, because even those things which we often regard as almost impossible to change can be changed. A religious group is very largely governed by the fact of birth—an

individual is born into a particular religious community. And for the vast majority, that is an unalterable fact. But there is always a minority who may change their religion. That is why I said it is almost impossible, at least, very difficult to change, but it is not impossible. Religion is one such basis of community. Then we have tribe or race, whatever you call it—the race concept is more or less given up now—but tribal affiliation of any type is again something which depends on birth. Language, and one may add in India, caste are also factors which are difficult to change for they are based on birth.

These are probably, as far as I can think at the moment, the four bases where a community is formed on grounds of birth, rather than choice or interest. But they are also not completely unalterable. Religion can be changed, Language is more difficult to change, but not absolutely impossible to change. So too tribe; today tribes are breaking down, tribal distinctions are breaking down, and therefore this basis may also change. Caste in its social aspect has been largely weakened in India today, though in its political aspect, it has perhaps become more important than at any time in the last two hundred or three hundred years. Thus caste, religion, language and tribe, these four principles of community based on the fact of birth give us communities of different types, but they do not exhaust the factors which may go to make up communities.

Let us take religion first. When we have a new religion, especially a religion which has an element of proselytization in it, we find that a new community is formed. Generally, the sense of kinship in a community of this type is stronger than even the bond of birth. We may in this connection think about the early Christians or the early Muslims. We may also think of some of the smaller religious communities in India today. When some of the smaller religious communities were formed in India, when people adopted a religion deliberately, they had a sense of kinship, and a sense of loyalty to one another, which transcended bonds of class and bonds of birth. Take again communities based on political faith. We find even today in various parts of the world, groups like, shall we say, the communists, and even among the communists, let us say, groups like the Trotskyites, who are bound to one another with an intensity of emotion which a community based on the natural

fact of birth does not exhibit. We find communities or groups based also on the fact of economic interest, professional interest, cultural interest and we find various degrees of intensity with which these bonds keep people together.

I think two generalisations can be made. One is that generally the smaller a community, the more it is a minority, the more intense is its feeling of akinness, the more intensely does it want to preserve itself. And that follows, I think, from the fact that a very small group is far more likely to be submerged in a larger group than a comparatively larger body. Smaller groups are therefore generally more insistent on their separate identity and its preservation, but sometimes we find exceptions also. The exceptions will however on closer scrutiny indicate that the sense of community is strongly present. In India, the Parsis constitute a very small community, and they are not generally aggressive or militant in the expression of their communal unity. So from one point of view, this small community does not show any sense of militancy. But from another point of view, if you look at the close inter-relations of the Parsi community, and the way it holds itself together, you will find that, without being aggressive or militant, it exhibits the character of preserving itself against absorption by any other group in a very marked degree.

The next point I would like to make is that in a very real sense, we cannot have a democracy without minorities, without distinct and different groups. Many definitions of democracy have been attempted and, as we all know, things which at first sight seem almost contrary to one another pass by that name. If we go to an American and ask him about a People's Democracy, his views of such democracy will be as emphatic and categorical as the views of, let us say, a citizen of China about democracy in the United States of America. And yet both claim to be democracies. People in all these areas claim that they are citizens of a democracy.

Here I would like to draw your attention to a rather interesting aspect of the spread of the idea of democracy. Many of you will remember that when originally the word democracy was used by Plato and Aristotle, it was not a term of praise, it was a term of condemnation. It was rule by the demos, it was rule by the mob. In fact, for Aristotle democracy was almost

interchangeable with what we sometimes call mobocracy—not perhaps a very classical or dignified word, but a word which has passed muster and which is very expressive. And even as late as the 18th century, democrats were often looked down upon. Some of the French encyclopaedists did not have a very high opinion about democracy. I am not quite sure which is the first, Switzerland or the United States of America, but when these two became democracies, for a long time they were the only two democracies in the modern world. And even in the middle of the 19th century, there were many who shunned the idea of democracy. Today the picture has completely changed, and everyone wants to be a democrat, whether it is in the Soviet Union or the United States of America.

Constitutional monarchies are also regarded as democracies today. Some unconstitutional monarchies also would claim to be democracies. It is fashionable today to become a democracy. I have referred to this aspect only in passing ; but the point to which I want to return is that with this wide variety of political manifestations, it would be very difficult to give any simple or clear definition of democracy. But I think three features must be regarded as common to any system which claims to be democratic. The first, I would say, is an equality of rights and duties for all citizens. Where there is not an equality or at any rate a tendency towards equalisation among the rights and duties for all, it is not a democracy. A hierarchical society and a democracy are contradictory. That is why we find that democracy after achieving political equality, seeks to attain economic and social equality as well. From political democracy we move to economic and social democracy though it has to be admitted that we have not yet attained complete democracy even in the political field, let alone the social or the economic field. I would therefore regard as the first feature of a democracy equal rights and duties for all.

I would mention as the second a tendency towards equalisation between rights and duties ; rights and duties tend to converge ; not only do we prescribe the same rights for all, not only do we prescribe the same duties for all, but also, there is an attempt at a convergence between rights and duties, so that every right arises out of a duty, and every duty follows from a right. Now this also has not been a characteristic of predemo-

cratic forms of society. But the third characteristic to which I would like to draw your attention most pointedly, and which has a special relevance for our subject today, which I would regard as an essential characteristic of a democracy, is distribution of power among different agencies and possibly in a number of different centres. Wherever power is concentrated in a single hand, or in the hands of a single group, or in the hands of a single class, it is not a democracy. Without a multiplicity of centres of power, there cannot be a democracy. And this can be argued out in various ways.

For one thing, one of the facts of human life is continual change. The individual changes, groups change, societies change, the economic and political backgrounds change, and in all these changes individuals have to change to keep up with the times. But there is no guarantee that they will all change in the same direction or with the same speed. When all the people are moving in the same direction, even then there is no guarantee that they will want to move at the same speed. Some will be cautious, some will be more adventurous. And if the individual is to find freedom of self-expression, these divergent points of view must find expression in political urges within the community itself.

Now the emergence of minorities is one expression of this divergence and distribution of power within any community or state. Minorities, as I suggested at an earlier stage, have a certain akinness of spirit, a certain community of approach and attitude, and they have also a sense of distinctness from the majority. Now if these minorities are submerged or suppressed by the majority, then to that extent it is a denial of democracy. And on the other hand, the more these centres of power are able to function freely, the greater the chances that there will be democratic progress within the community.

In our country this problem has appeared in many ways. We very often talk of unity in diversity as one of the characteristics of Indian culture and civilization. What we mean by that phrase is that there are a number of different groups within the country with common habits, common attitudes, common customs, common traditions, common beliefs, common ways of action ; and yet there is some kind of overlying unity among the groups. The problem is how to reconcile the two.

Wherever these smaller groups assert their individuality to an extent which threatens the unity of the nation or interferes with the health of the body politic as a whole, dangers may arise. Wherever on the other hand, the body politic as a whole tries to submerge or suppress the individuality of the separate groups, again there is a danger to democracy, and to the health of the body politic.

I would like to place before you in this connection a point of view that I have often expressed before, but which I think bears repetition. Many think that the diversity of India and consequent multiplicity of centres of power is a source of weakness for the country. I have always held the contrary view. I feel that the greater the number of centres of power in a people—provided the centres of power are held in some kind of a balance with one another, and there is harmony among them—the stronger the country. Where you have a completely homogenous, monolithic society, the chances of survival of that society or community are always less than those of a heterogenous society in which there are many centres of power, many ways of expression. The reason for this is easy to understand. Since society is changing, circumstances are changing, a monolithic society may not be able to react to a new situation with complete success. But if there is a heterogenous society, one element or other in that heterogenous society may react to the new situation, and help to preserve the community as a whole. Diversity of response and distribution of power are therefore sources of strength, not causes of weakness. The history of India is itself a shining example of this fact. More monolithic societies have disappeared, but the more, shall I say, democratic form of Indian society lives. In spite of the fact that there was no political democracy here, the distribution of power in a number of centres, the existence of different types of communities within what one may call a loose federal social framework, has enabled India to survive. Wherever society shows such diversity, wherever different groups exist side by side, the chances of survival of the entire community are greater.

Now how does this link up with our problem today? Today, there is a common citizenship in India. Power has to be exercised in terms of common programmes and common attitudes and common ideals. At the same time there are

groups based on facts of language or religion or political beliefs or economic interests. I would suggest for your consideration that if these groups are rigid and unchangeable, especially at the level of political action, it would create a problem for this country. I have always been against political parties based on religion, political parties based on caste, not because there is anything intrinsically evil in any of them, but because in the modern world, in the kind of society in which we function, such types of attachment of a political programme to a group based on birth—which is comparatively rigid and inalienable—which cannot be changed easily, create difficulties for the group itself.

One other interesting phenomenon has to be remembered in this context. Wherever group consciousness is strong, it is the minority which suffers most. If group consciousness can be diffused and dispersed, the minorities get many privileges, many advantages, which they would not get, if group consciousness became strong. Majorities are in any case in a position of advantage. I think it should be one of the aims of every minority group to see that the group consciousness of the majority becomes diffused. This can be done only if right issues are selected. If groups are constituted on grounds other than rigid and inalienable conditions like religion, caste, tribe, or language, we can change or modify the composition and number of the groups.

Even rigid groups may change under the pressure of events, but in their case the changes are far more difficult to effect. Proselytization on a large scale is almost impossible in the modern world. And therefore for any religious group to think that it will convert all the members of some other religious group to its own religion is not practical politics today. Languages can also spread, but here also the experience of history shows that linguistic boundaries are one of the most rigid things in the world. The political boundaries of Europe have changed again and again during the last four or five hundred years, but the linguistic boundaries of Europe have hardly changed. Even political suppression has not been able to stifle the linguistic minorities. If persecution could kill a language, Polish would have been killed many years ago. No language can be killed by persecution without exterminating the people speaking the language.

Similarly, we cannot easily change tribal or caste organisations. All such groups suffer from a lack of flexibility. In the modern world, where politics is expanding its scope and where political power is impinging on many different spheres of life, we have to be specially careful of the way in which interests are organised. If a minority group is based on considerations which cannot be easily changed, it will be ultimately the minority which will suffer.

On the other hand, if groups are formed on considerations which are flexible, it will make for greater mobility among groups and therefore ultimately for greater cohesion within the community. Persons from any part of the country or belonging to any birth group can come and join such organisations on the basis of political belief or economic considerations. I know that economic classes also have a certain degree of rigidity, but the degree of rigidity in economic stratification is far less than that in a caste or religious or linguistic structure. Similarly, cultural groups show greater flexibility than groups based on the fact of birth. If groups are formed on the basis of cultural ideals, there again the ease in movement from one group to another would be far greater than where there are water-tight compartments based on religion, language or caste.

The greatest danger to national unity arises where a group seeks to combine all these rigid elements. Where a unit based on birth includes all the factors like religion, language, caste, and tribe and links them up with political, economic and cultural affiliations, such a group would seek to repel all other groups and have hardly any cross associations with them. On the other hand, when individuals belong to different groups for different purposes, and there are many cross currents which cut across group loyalties, we have a better balanced and healthier national community. In fact, the more of cross associations we have the better for everyone concerned and the better for the health of a democracy.

I would like to return to the point that the essence of democracy lies in the distribution of power in a number of different centres. Such distribution of power can be on the basis of community groups; it can also be on the basis of interest. I have just suggested that where the distribution is on the basis of community groups, based on the fact of birth, there are dangers to

social unity. But having said that, I would also say that groups based on birth cannot be completely overlooked in our national context. We have to face facts as they are, especially in a country like India. Some people resent the existence of linguistic or religious or caste groups and would like to eliminate them. We may disapprove, but the linguistic groups will remain. We may dislike it, but the religious groups will also remain. All that we can do is to see that they do not become too rigid, that all these diversities do not tend to ossify, that they do not tend to combine in a way so that the same group is characterised by all these differences. That would be the greatest danger, but having recognised the danger, we may say that the multiplicity of groups also serves a function in modern democracy in India.

One very interesting feature, I have already referred to it casually, is that while on the one hand, the spread of democracy and education tend to weaken some of the social implications of caste, language and religion, on the other hand, politically they are becoming more powerful. They are becoming more powerful because, there is a new awareness that if we want something from the state, we have to press our demand for it. In the present context of the Indian social, political and economic situation, the state has to take the major initiative in the reconstruction of national life. In almost every region, the State is playing a direct role in the spread of education, but then, the creation of facilities is not keeping pace with the demand for education. Nor is the opportunity of utilising that education growing as fast as is necessary. We have today the phenomenon of a vast number of people who have gone through the educational process, and yet are not socially useful. Many of them are unemployed ; some are almost unemployable. This is the more unfortunate, as at the same time, there is the demand for more trained and educated personnel. Then again, there are the special types of education—technical, vocational, professional, engineering, medicine and agriculture. The demand for such education is far greater than the available facilities. Men therefore form into groups and try to utilise their group pressure, the power of their number, in order to get an entry into educational institutions of this type. Such attempts to secure by pressure a larger share of available facilities for one's own group have been condemned ; and on purely theoretical grounds, on grounds of abstract justice,

merit and equality, there is no doubt they deserve to be condemned.

On the other hand, when we look at facts as they are, and the great inequalities in Indian society as a result of age old historical processes, it is equally inescapable that we must provide special treatment for certain groups for a certain period, especially in the educational field. We have done so in the case of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and it is already beginning to pay dividends. I can tell you one experience of mine. When the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes scholarships were first instituted, one could almost count on one's fingers the number of people who applied and qualified. And for the higher ranges of education, their number was very small indeed. Today, there are tens of thousands of such scholars and very soon there will be hundreds of thousands. There are other groups also which require similar treatment for a certain period ; but I have always held that wherever such special treatment is given to a group in order to enable it to catch up with the others, it should be a clearly thought out programme, a phased programme, where special help must be gradually withdrawn, over a number of years ; and this withdrawal of special treatment or support must be written into the programme from the very beginning. What has very often happened and is still happening is that some special concession is given to a group and it continues indefinitely. Then when there is a demand to withdraw it, naturally there is resistance. But if it is written into the programme from the beginning that the special consideration will be given over a number of years on an increasing scale, then held at a certain level for some years, and then gradually diminished, there will be no occasion for such resistances. Perhaps twenty-five years or one generation is the least time we have to give to this sort of a programme.

Even from the point of view of democracy, there is something to be said for special treatment of backward groups for specified periods. Unless the different elements of the community are brought to a more or less equal level, the community as a whole, the Indian people as a whole, cannot pull its weight in world affairs. We cannot have different centres of power based on political or economic considerations unless different groups in the country are more or less equal in education, wealth and ability. One other thing I will say in this connection. In a very real

sense, safety lies in the multiplicity of such groups. If there are only one or two groups, then their claims may become too insistent and dangerous. But when there is a multiplicity of groups, it is easier for the State to hold the balance even than when there are one or two powerful groups, who claim all the privileges for themselves. This balancing of claims on what one may call the principle of equity is one of the most difficult problems in a democracy. We find that not only in this country, in other countries of the world also, pressure groups of this type are an element in the growth of democracy itself.

Nowhere in the world do the whole people act as one homogenous mass, except at moments of grave national crisis. In moments of such crisis, we have a sense of unity in India as was demonstrated vividly very recently, when the entire Indian people, regardless of all differences among themselves, rose as one man against the Chinese menace. But it is only in moments of such crisis that we have this kind of unified reaction of the entire community ; otherwise, in every country of the world, even in the oldest democracies, we find different groups pulling continually in different directions, and democracy being achieved as a result of the interplay of the different forces.

The point to which I want to return and with which I wish to conclude my remarks is, that it is in the distribution of power in a number of different centres that the essence of democracy lies in the modern world. And these different centres should be as varied as possible. The more diversified these centres, the easier it is for democracy to function. If we have these groups based on diverse interests, it will also add to social homogeneity and cohesion in an indirect way. By language a man may belong to one group, by political affiliation to another group, by religion to a third group, by economic interest to a fourth group and by cultural interest to a fifth group. If in this way he has affiliations with different members of the Indian community in different directions, it will not only broaden him as an individual, but it will also guarantee that his reactions will not at any time be too intense or narrow and based on only one fanatical line of response.

We can ensure that condition by deliberate state action. We are trying to evolve today a common type of education, so that educational interests forge one kind of unity among the

people. Language groups are there, and it is no use trying to deny them. They will be there. Any attempt to suppress a language will in fact create a violent revulsion and may be a cause for fissiparous tendencies. In a country like India, there will never be one language spoken always and by everybody. There may be a common language of communication, as English is today, as Persian has been at one time, as Sanskrit was once, and Hindi is planned to become in the future, but that will be a language of communication for certain specific purposes. Language in the most intimate sense will however be different for different groups of people, and these linguistic groups will have a rich contribution to make to the totality of Indian culture. Suppression of any one language will impoverish India as a whole.

I would extend this principle beyond language and say that suppression of any group based on a real interest will impoverish India. We must approach the problem of minorities from this point of view, that every minority is a precious element in the totality of life of the community, and every minority has to play a role in the national life. At the same time, each minority should be careful that it does not choose issues which are rigid. For its prosperity, and indeed for its survival, a minority should strive to see that it is not based on consideration where it will be isolated. To take an example from politics again, the aim of every group in politics is to become a majority. If we choose issues where by definition we are condemned to remain a minority for ever, we have chosen wrongly. A religious political organisation is therefore doomed to frustration unless it is a religious political organisation of the majority and then it becomes dangerous from the opposite point of view. A linguistic political community is also bound to be a minority in India whatever that linguistic group may be. Let us take Hindi which is the language of the largest group. If a political party was based only on the Hindi language, it would cover only about 35 or 40 per cent of the Indian people. If they united on the basis of Hindi, they would succeed in uniting the others on the basis of their not being Hindi-speaking. I give the example of Hindi because it has the largest group, but this applies even more to other language groups. Take any language you like, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi or Telugu. Any one who organises a political party on the basis of language will immediately condemn himself to

being a perpetual minority on the all India plane. It is the same with regard to caste, and with regard to tribe. The basis of a political party should therefore be a more flexible thing.

As I have been trying to stress, I am a great believer in the great contribution which minorities can make. Any country which has suppressed its minorities has ultimately suffered. It may be a very small minority but that makes no difference. When the Moors were driven out of Spain, the dark days descended on Spain. When Huguenots went out of France, there was a great setback in the trade, industry and commerce of the French. When the Jews were persecuted in Germany in Hitler's regime, perhaps, the fate of the Nazi regime was sealed that very day. Wherever minorities have been persecuted, it has hurt the entire community in two ways—first by driving out potentially creative and capable people, and secondly by creating friction and an attitude of intolerance and fanaticism among the majority. I may add that in the modern world, the greatest danger to any community is fanaticism and intolerance.

Perhaps the outstanding fact of the modern world is the rate of change in almost every aspect of life. Technology is making progress at a rate which is unprecedented in history. It has been said that 90 per cent of all the scientists who have ever lived in the world are living today. It is certainly true that perhaps 90 per cent of all the books that have ever been published in the world have been published in the last 50 years ; and every year, the number of books that are published is far greater than the number of books published the year before. It is a kind of an avalanche which is gathering strength. The world is moving at a terrific pace. With this terrific rate of change, closed systems have no future, closed minds have no future. Minorities are one of the strongest safeguards of any community that there shall not be a closed system, and there shall not be closed minds.

Every minority is in a sense a protestant group, a dissident group. Every minority is a heretical group when compared to the majority. It is not an exaggeration to say that the dissidents are the salt of the earth, provided they remember that they are dissidents in terms of quality and not dissidents merely because of birth. The existence of minorities is therefore necessary in a democracy. I would say it is a condition for the survival of democracy. It may be a political minority, but it is always the

political minority which makes for progress and change. It may be an economic minority or it may be an intellectual minority, but it must stand for progress and change. If we can create conditions where minorities based on birth are steadily converted into minorities based on intellect, based on politics, based on economics, based on cultural interest, we will at the same time ensure the preservation of all the minorities, and also assure the progress of democracy in our country.